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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000163

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: ARENA OPTIMISTIC ABOUT MARCH 15 ELECTION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Former GOES Legal Advisor and (conservative, pro-U.S.) ARENA presidential hopeful Luis Mario Rodriguez believes ARENA's January 18 victory in the San Salvador municipal race has boosted Rodrigo Avila's chances of victory March 15. He contrasted Avila's newfound confidence and recently released plan of government with the (leftwing) Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front's (FMLN) missteps and contradictions. Rodriguez criticized the two candidates, avoidance of debates and interviews and commented on the cabinet selection process for both parties. End Summary.

San Salvador Win Boosts ARENA

¶2. (C) Luis Mario Rodriguez, former GOES Legal Advisor and ARENA presidential hopeful, told Poloffs February 18 he was much more optimistic about ARENA's chances for victory in March 15 presidential elections because of ARENA's victory in the San Salvador mayoral race January 18. He said he thought both parties had equal opportunities for winning, but ARENA had better policy proposals and fewer contradictions than the FMLN. He said El Salvador's political right had come together and a single, two-candidate election would favor ARENA, which would benefit from its alliances with smaller parties. He cautioned, however, that he did not view an ARENA victory as certain and that he did not think the ruling party would win by a large double-digit margin. He suggested the impact of the endorsement by influential San Miguel mayor Wilfredo Salgado was relative because voters would not automatically vote the way Salgado tells them to.

Rodrigo Avila Gains Confidence

¶3. (C) Rodriguez said the outcome of January 18 legislative and municipal elections has dramatically bolstered Rodrigo Avila's confidence. Rodriguez described Avila as psychologically changed and more secure in his chances of winning. He explained that Avila had been nervous and that a candidate who is worried about whether he can win does not interact well with the public. Rodriguez praised Avila's ability to persist when the FMLN had a large lead, enduring harsh internal party criticism of his leadership and debating skills as well as outside attacks.

FMLN Missteps

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, Rodriguez believes the FMLN was surprised by the turnaround and did not have an appropriate posture for defeat after losing San Salvador. The opposition party has continued its missteps, and Rodriguez suggested that the mistakes were so glaring that they appeared to be an effort to undermine Funes. He referenced the party's celebration

of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's referendum victory on February 15 and statements by Legislator Gerston Martinez contradicting Funes' economic adviser, Alex Segovia.

Rodriguez Enthusiastic About ARENA's Platform

¶15. (C) Rodriguez spoke in positive terms about ARENA's platform, which he had helped draft and launch. He praised the plan for including party outsiders in its development and for its specific proposals in areas such as campaign financing and publicity for political parties. However, he acknowledged that areas such as electoral reform and electronic government services could hurt Avila if he is elected and is subsequently unable to fulfill the promises. He suggested that Avila assign a technocrat to help coordinate and carry out the proposals such as allowing Salvadorans to vote outside of El Salvador.

Avila and Funes Avoid Debates and Interviews

¶16. (C) He criticized both candidates for declining debates and interviews. Rodriguez explained that he had advised Avila to accept a debate but said that Avila and his team had chosen not to do so and suggested that participation in a debate was a personal decision that only Avila could take. Rodriguez compared Funes' refusal to concede interviews to (conservative) Diario de Hoy because of the paper's criticism of Funes to Avila's refusal to debate on CNN en espanol (where Funes had worked as an interviewer) and said that both could be interpreted as showing little tolerance for criticism.

¶17. (C) He said that neither ARENA nor the FMLN would announce cabinet selections before the election. Rodriguez noted that none of the Friends of Mauricio or more moderate FMLN members that he respected had obtained Assembly seats. He then speculated that perhaps Funes and the FMLN had reached a deal where Funes would get the cabinet posts and the party would control the Assembly posts. Rodriguez asserted that he respected Funes and thought that Funes wanted to have a good relationship with the United States but that Funes' problem would be the FMLN. As an example that Funes and his advisers may anticipate difficulties with the FMLN, Rodriguez recalled that in a recent conference Alex Segovia, Funes' principal economic advisor, stated that Funes will need the support of the right to govern.

¶18. (C) Comment: As usual, Rodriguez was an engaging and helpful interlocutor. While he was pushed to the side by President Antonio Saca's support for Avila during last year's ARENA candidate selection process, he appears to be a rising star in ARENA and could well join an Avila government in some capacity. Rodriguez appears to hold favorable views and have a good understanding of the United States. He spoke in glowing terms of his visit to Washington in 2007 and proudly showed off a photo of himself and former President George W. Bush. He mentioned reading President Obama's autobiography and had a copy of former President Bill Clinton's autobiography on his bookshelf.

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